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TAGS: MCAP MOPS PREL PGOV PTER PHUM AF
SUBJECT: PRT/LASHKAR GAH: MUSA QALA ? AN INSIDER VIEW

REF: KABUL 5584

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On November 21 PRTOff met with an Afghan from Helmand Province's Musa Qala district, someone with some influence in the district and access to information about the current situation on the ground. The individual offered harsh criticism of the three factions vying for control of the district: the local shura nominally in charge (the Local Authority put in place following the Musa Qala Agreement); opponents of the local shura (individuals largely associated with former warlords); and the Taliban. He described not only a quiet district in which two shuras exert some influence, but also an accommodation with Taliban elements in the district in order to keep the warlord faction out of power. His suggestion on the way forward is to support the admittedly unattractive local administration with a nearby ISAF presence, trained local security and reconstruction and development. Support to the local shura would eventually permit the community to dislodge and drive out the Taliban.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On November 21 PRTOff met with an Afghan from Musa Qala district, located in the north of Helmand Province, a person with some influence in the district and access to information about the current situation there. The individual described the situation in Musa Qala following the controversial agreement between local leaders in the district and the Government of Afghanistan (GOA), wherein the local shura recognizes GOA authority and provides assurances regarding maintenance of security, and the GOA approves a slate of locally-chosen district officials (REFTEL). Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and ISAF have withdrawn from the district although they aver they will return.

¶3. (SBU) The individual's motivation is not entirely clear, though he said that only when the true circumstances of what is happening in Musa Qala come out can any progress be made. He believes the GOA is not receiving the truth about what is transpiring in the district, and cited communications between the head of neighboring Baghran district, Haji Abdel Wahid (a/k/a Rais Bagrani) and ministers at the highest levels of the GOA. Describing Wahid as a ?double dealer,? the individual says Wahid has

two satellite phones, one to call GOA ministers and assure them there are no Taliban in Musa Qala, and the other to call the Taliban to say the GOA is not in control.

Villagers Trapped Between Corrupt, Warring Elites

¶ 14. (SBU) The person painted a picture of elites warring with each other and standing between the ?international donors? and ?the people.? According to this individual, those elites are corrupt people, only interested in personal enrichment, not in permitting the donors and the people to make a connection that would lead to development.

¶ 15. (SBU) The individual focused most of his attention on two of the three groups seeking to control the district. The first is essentially the warlord class, identified with the Akhunzadha clan of the former Governor and the current Deputy Governor. The person vehemently denounced this group, and said the Akhunzadhas? interests would be threatened if Musa Qala became safe and secure. The other group is comprised of the local shura and administration that now claims to control the district, pursuant to the agreement with the GOA. Those elders, he said, were compelled to seek that agreement (and the resulting calm) not only by the fierce fighting in the north of Helmand this past summer, but also to keep the warlords at bay. Taliban comprise the third group.

All is Quiet in Musa Qala ... Thanks to Two Shuras

¶ 16. (SBU) The person said that the Musa Qala district

KABUL 00005638 002 OF 003

center is quiet, for the time being. He said it is not that difficult to maintain quiet, as the district is made up of a single tribe, the Alizai, and everyone knows each other. There are two shuras that decide disputes or otherwise address problems that arise in the district. The first is the ?official? shura, the one that reached the agreement with the GOA. Apparently, this one lacks credibility with the local population, and if this shura is unable to resolve an issue, there is a second shura, 50 strong, to which the locals can turn. He said that the ?official? shura will accept the decisions of this larger shura.

Corrupt, Incompetent Shura Maintaining Uneasy Balance

¶ 17. (SBU) While he acknowledged that the ?official? shura exerted some influence in the daily life of the district, the individual had no praise for it. He counts among its ranks Taliban and ?murderers? (alternatively, people with ?blood on their hands?). He also described the individuals nominated by the shura for district positions (and approved by the GOA) as ?murderers? that the people do not trust. The shura is mostly illiterate, without any unifying idea on how to govern. This makes shura members vulnerable to influence from the outside, even by the Akhunzadha clan.

¶ 18. (SBU) While he made clear his own hatred of the Taliban (specifically, foreign Taliban from Pakistan), he was not clear about the level of support enjoyed by the Taliban amongst the shura or the local community. Certainly, from his description, there are many who wish the Taliban out of the district. However, according to the individual, the local shura cannot push the Taliban out, or rather, have a compelling reason not to do so: the local elders have reached a balance of sorts with the local Taliban, for by accepting a Taliban presence in the district they are able to keep the warlords out (something they cannot do alone).

Way forward: Support the Shuras with ISAF and Development

¶9. (SBU) The individual asserted that if the two shuras are supported by ISAF and ?international donors? the Taliban could eventually be forced out. (NOTE: He devoted little attention to the GOA, describing it as weak and unable to support the shura. END NOTE.) If no action is taken, the Taliban eventually will decide to dissolve the shura; they are reluctant to take such action now because the people are happy with the relative calm and the return of commerce, and disrupting that might provoke an unwanted reaction. The individual thought ISAF should remain close to the district, for with ISAF in the area the Taliban would be reluctant to take action. If ISAF departs, then ?the next day the Taliban will take over the district.? He also thought that the introduction of reconstruction and development to the district would also support the shura.

¶10. (SBU) Asked whether the local community would accept ANSF in the district, i.e., ANSF from outside the district, the person said the people would accept those forces. (COMMENT: This was a slightly unexpected comment, given the common impression in Helmand that ANSF are corrupt, especially the police. In a November 10 meeting at the Embassy, the head of the Musa Qala shura hedged on the question of ANSF being deployed in Musa Qala, saying they could be accepted, possibly, in the ?long term? (REFTEL). END COMMENT) The individual added that ANSF would immediately be targeted by the Taliban if there was no ISAF presence nearby. He thought that more immediate support could be offered in the form of training for local security forces. Trained local security would support the government, and would eventually assist in turning the Taliban out of the district. (NOTE: It has been proposed that forty members of the woefully under-equipped Musa Qala local security force be sent to Lashkar Gah for training using the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP) curriculum; however, details have not yet been worked out.

KABUL 00005638 003 OF 003

END NOTE.)

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: PRTOff cannot verify the information provided by this single source. However, the individual has influence in and access to the district, seemed thoughtful and credible, and certainly was willing to criticize all parties involved. He was dismissive of the warring elites, and expressed interest in seeing a measure of security and assistance for the local community. He expressed a willingness to continue the discussion, saying that he would report both ?positive and negative? things about what was transpiring in that troubled district. His version of the state of play tends to reinforce our perception that the jury is still out on the MQ Agreement but that the GOA and ISAF elements need to test access to Musa Qala soon.

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